

Trauma in the Newsroom

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Phylisia Donaldson

Thesis Advisor

Professor Dom Caristi

**Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana**

April 2018

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2018

SP611
Undergrad
Thesis
LD
2489
.24
2018
.D66

Abstract

In our country, journalists are often called terms such as the "watchdogs" or "whistleblowers" of our society. As a whole, we have a duty to seek the truth and protect the public from any entity that would try to chip away at the freedoms we enjoy through our democracy. In day-to-day interactions, journalists can be exposed to various acts of violence and crime. They have multiple deadlines to meet and work under constant pressure. An unfortunate, upward trend in violent acts, whether those are mass shootings, bombings, or stabbings, causes me to wonder if journalists are taking the necessary precautions to promote a positive mental and emotional environment. For my Honors Thesis, I will be creating a documentary that explores the social atmosphere in the newsroom. More specifically, I am looking to see if the newsroom is a place where its workers can seek solidarity and comfort after covering tragedies.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professor Dom Caristi for advising me through this project. His guidance pushed me to be able to finish my thesis and graduate on time. Even though our partnership lasted a semester, I am grateful for the opportunity to learn from him.

I would like to thank Henry Davis, Imari Powell, and Kaia Thompson for acting in some of the scenes. I would like to thank William House for helping me shoot and edit the documentary.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my family and friends for encouraging and praying for me as I finished this project. Your support is greatly appreciated.

Project Analysis Statement

At times, it seems as if journalists are fighting a losing battle. Staff sizes are smaller, newspapers are disappearing left and right, and we now have to defend ourselves against claims of "fake news." The workload for some reporters has doubled as stations seek after multimedia journalists, those who can shoot and edit packages without the help of a camera operator. Social media has pulled many viewers, who used to get their news from news broadcasts, from the television to their phones. In the meantime, stations are pushing their workers to have a presence both on the Internet and TV. Most recently, violent acts such as mass shootings and bombings are, in some sense, becoming a common occurrence in our country. These are some of the changes I have noticed within my career field and it caused me to be concerned about my future in this business. I could not understand how journalists handle so many pressures, and I thought I would easily get burned out at my first job. Thankfully, my professor addressed my concerns when she talked about a platform that advocates for awareness in the media rooms when news professionals cover traumatic events. After doing some research on the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma and listening to her teachings, I was inspired to make a documentary that looks into how news professionals are treated when they are impacted by traumatic events.

Last semester I took a class that discussed the ethical and legal matters journalists might face. In one of our units, we watched *Covering Columbine*. This documentary touched on how this violent, senseless act affected journalists in the subsequent weeks, months, and even years. As I began to understand the toll that trauma coverage can take on journalists, another violent act captured my attention. Last October, a gunman shot into a crowd at a music festival in Las Vegas, Nevada. Hundreds were injured and many were killed. The

news coverage of this event went on for weeks. As I researched for my project, I saw prompts on the Dart Center's website. They offered advice, guides, and research to journalists who were covering the mass shooting. After I read some of the prompts, I knew I had to have subjects in my documentary that could provide insight. I immediately thought of my professors, most of whom have had many years in the career field that I am about to embark on. I narrowed my list down to four individuals. Professor Mary Spillman teaches journalism at Ball State University. She worked as a reporter and anchor in both television and radio. She was able to provide the perspective of a reporter in a medium-sized city. My next subject is Phil Bremen, who is an associate professor of telecommunications at Ball State University. Bremen served as a NBC Correspondent in countries all over the world. He has covered the drug trade in Latin America and the civil war in El Salvador. In many instances, he was able to provide an overall perspective of a journalist who has worked an area with continuous violent acts and exposed to traumatic events. He mentioned in his interview a moment where he and his crew returned to find their driver dead from multiple stab wounds in El Salvador. In another instance, a different crew he knew was killed in South Africa. Bremen has the ability to broaden my documentary from a local to an international outlook. The next subject is Mark Massé, a professor of journalism at Ball State University. Massé acts as my expert in this film. In addition to being a professor, he wrote a book entitled *Trauma Journalism: On Deadline & In Harm's Way*. Massé interviewed a number of journalists across the world and got their side on how covering crises and tragedies have negatively impacted them. Massé confirmed the research I had found and give humanness to the statistics. One of his examples was a high-ranking TV journalist who worked as a broadcaster for ABC News. He covered many major conflicts and saw a lot of

bloodshed, including the deaths of his camera operators and friends. Massé asked him how he coped with this job. The journalist said he would go back home and stay there for a month or so before returning to work. He repeated this cycle for thirty years. At that time, journalists were expected to keep their emotions to themselves. Their job was to keep the camera focused on their subject's feelings and not their own. Currently, there is more awareness in modern newsrooms. Keeping that in mind, my final subject is Douglas Walker. He works as a crime and justice reporter at *The Star Press* in Muncie, Indiana. Often times, we get caught up in the individual, violent acts. Immediately, we might think of the journalists who cover mass shootings at Virginia Tech, Parkland, or Columbine. However, crime and war reporters are exposed to violent acts more consistently and frequently than any other journalist. With Walker's interview, I can get an understanding of the present-day atmosphere in media outlets and the mentality one has to have when he or she is covering crime on a daily basis. My four subjects complemented each other and the documentary well. My main objective was to have sound bites that kept a conversation going, and I am happy to see it worked out well.

The editing process was extremely difficult. I had over two hours of interview footage to sift through. Fortunately, the subjects said material that was both insightful and relevant to my topic. The challenge was to make sure I did not use comments that would be redundant or take away from the story. My main concern was the lack of a central subject in the documentary film. I did not have to have one, but it does help the viewer understand an idea better if a director used a central subject. In some documentaries, a single person acts as the example through which the director can tell his or her story. If a film were to discuss the challenges of living in poverty, then a director would focus on someone who is

living in an impoverished situation to give human relation to the story. For my documentary, I decided to have all four subjects take equal parts more or less within the film. Massé served as the pacesetter for this documentary. I had him introduce topics and the other three professors stemmed from his commentary. Another challenge was picking comments that represented the subjects well. Every person received an introduction in the film. From there, I chose the best sound bites that worked with the flow of the conversation. The biggest challenge was getting relevant B-roll. For those who may not know, B-roll is footage that is intercut with interviews. It acts as footage that gives a visual understanding to some of the things talked about in an interview. In regards to the poverty documentary example, if someone were to mention how they walk three miles to take a shower, the viewer would see footage of that individual walking to that destination to take a shower. In the beginning, I planned on using archive footage of my subjects when they were on-air talent. All except one had worked in broadcast and I wanted to intercut their interview with footage of them in the workplace to give my documentary more substance. Unfortunately, only one of my subjects had footage of any kind. The rest supplied me personal photos. I had to think of a backup plan. As you will see in the documentary, I used the photographs of them and the footage of Bremen in the film. Since my topic dealt with journalists working in the newsroom, I saw fit to record my peers in my journalism class for B-roll. I also took the time to record some actors pretending to be reporters. I wanted some dramatic scenes in the beginning and end of the documentary. That footage worked well with the narration to provide something that hooked the viewer to my documentary.

As with any project, my documentary has features that needed improvement. My greatest disappointment with the documentary is the quality of the interviews. I do not

know what happened exactly, but I struggled to get the camera to focus on my subjects. It is very frustrating to me because focusing a camera is a simple task. I had a tough time, but I was able to fix any issues during the editing process to the best of my abilities. Another technical challenge was choosing appropriate music for the film. Most news students are unfamiliar with using music in conjunction with their news packages. We have been told that is something we must not do because we do not want to cause bias in our work. However, documentaries feature many musical selections. I had to learn how to pair music with sections in my documentary, and sometimes that took much longer than expected. I had to have music that fits with the mood of the documentary. If chosen incorrectly, the music could very well mess up the documentary despite the quality of shots, narration, or sound bites. In some areas, I needed somber music. In others, I needed to have an upbeat tempo, but the sound still had to be somber. Music greatly affects the mood of a documentary, and I tried my best to choose the right selections. Lastly, I feel as if my documentary is more of a news package than a film. It is missing some cinematic value. That could have been achieved through more B-roll, angles in the interviews, and graphics. With all of those additions, the documentary would be twice as long. I did not want to lose my audience's attention, so I kept the documentary less than 10 minutes. I believe the viewer will like the content. Each of the subjects did a great job in the interviews. I do wish I had a reporter that did cover a high-profile traumatic event or lived in a bustling city. Walker did fit the mold, but he is a crime reporter in a rather quiet town. The crime rate in Muncie cannot compare to that of Chicago, Detroit, or Atlanta. Nonetheless, I was able to make do with who I had and I am pleased with that.

I am grateful to have moments in the film that I can take pride in. Before shooting the first and last scenes, I had a vision of what I wanted. I knew I wanted two people interviewing one another in a well-lit space with a dark backdrop. Lo and behold, I was able to deliver on my vision. The first sequences of shots hook the reader. I love the moment where the male reporter pauses to look at the camera when the narrator asks the question, "When it's all said and done, what do you think the reporter has seen?" The male reporter is connecting with the viewer and the viewer is forced to consider that question. Also, I am satisfied with the writing. There are some areas of redundancies, but I can take pride in the fact that I was able to connect the sound bites together. Hopefully, this topic is able to spark a conversation within the journalism community. Not too many people are aware of the possible second-hand trauma journalists can face. It causes a greater awareness with our viewers and among our peers. Lastly, I am happy with the editing skills I learned. This documentary has expanded my skillset with Adobe Premiere Pro. I will be able to use them for future endeavors and cannot wait to start my next project.

In the beginning, my idea seemed easy to do, and I thought I would be able to do all of the work on my own. What I did not realize is this project requires a team. In fact, any kind of documentary requires a team. Thankfully, I was able to get some help for interviews and B-roll footage. I appreciate the help because this topic needs to be brought up to every aspiring journalist. Just as I started this to see what my future would look like, others who look to work in news publications need to be informed about the risks. Hard news is not synonymous with bloodshed and gore. News stations air other stories besides a mass murder or car accident. Often times others, mainly the public, think journalists enjoy covering violent acts because it "gets our ratings up." Nothing is further from the truth. We

are in this business to share the stories of people around us. Through those stories, changes in our governments, businesses, and schools can happen. I am glad I was able to finish this documentary. I hope this project serves as a catalyst for my career. I have a desire to create documentaries, and this is the start of many more to come. I hope the viewer enjoys this and starts to sympathize more with the difficulties reporters face on a day-to-day basis.

Thesis

(YouTube Link)

<https://youtu.be/IwPAvXzCucM>

Sources

Arana, G. (2017, December 07). A Mental-Health Epidemic In The Newsroom.

Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/18/mental-health-journalism-trauma_n_7305460.html

Bolton, E. (2009, November 02). PTSD: National Center for PTSD. Retrieved from

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/community/journalists-ptsd.asp>

Clark, R. P. (2017, October 14). After Las Vegas shooting, a Columbine expert offers

heartfelt advice about the why of it all. Retrieved October 2017, 7, from

<https://www.poynter.org/news/after-las-vegas-shooting-columbine-expert-offers-heartfelt-advice-about-why-it-all>

Images, D. B. (2017, November 06). Resources for Covering Mass Shootings.

Retrieved from <https://dartcenter.org/resources/resources-covering-mass-shootings>

Mitchell, A., & Page, D. (2015, April 29). *State of the News Media 2015*(Rep.).

Retrieved <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2017/05/30142603/state-of-the-news-media-report-2015-final.pdf>

Smith, R., Newman, E., & Drevo, S. (2015, July 1). Covering Trauma: Impact on Journalists. Retrieved from <https://dartcenter.org/content/covering-trauma-impact-on-journalists>

Wilson, C. (2017, October 02). Mass Shootings in the US: See 35 Years in One Chart. Retrieved from <http://time.com/4965022/deadliest-mass-shooting-us-history/>

TRAUMA IN THE NEWSROOM SCRIPT

Visuals	Audio
Opening shot on either camera or empty desk with the lights shining reporter in focus facing interviewee who's out of focus	Narrator: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In front of the camera reporters and anchors are trained to observe everyday occurrences. We relay many kinds of information to the public in real time.
Quickly cut to black Reporter doing a stand up and then blur it out for the fact reporter doing a stand up	Narrator: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Once it's all said and done, what do you think the reporter has seen?
It would be nice to have a soft heart monitor in the background grow louder until the words "Trauma in the News Room" Pops up. reporter and anchors working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As this career field evolves, precautionary measures have to take place to ensure the mental health and well being of its staff is being supported.
Title	"Trauma in the News Room" Pops up.
MM on camera	SOT [00:01:48] The topic was actually something I looked at in grad school.
	Narrator <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professor Mark Massé teaches at Ball State University since the late 90's. One of his coworkers led him to this topic.
MM on camera	SOT [00:01:48] I was teaching and actually there was a faculty member who was no longer here, but he was doing research on Newsroom burnout. Journalist who for whatever reason or a combination of reasons decide to leave the field and so I looked at some of his research.
Graphic	Narrator <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Massé ended up interviewing some of the reporters and editor who covered the 1996 Oklahoma bombing. One thing led to another and ...
MM on camera	SOT: 4:04 It just started with an interview and then I just had a hunch that if I go to Oklahoma

	city, I'll meet some people who will share their stories and they did.
B-roll of his book Author picture	<p>Narrator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The book entitled, "Trauma Journalism: On Deadline in Harm's Way" explains the emotional consequences journalists suffer from covering traumatic events.
MM on camera	SOT [00:06:54] It's not so much a stigma or a stereotype. It's actually has been for more than a century has been almost an understanding that if you're a journalist keep yourself out of the story don't talk about your emotions. It's not your job. Your job is to either have the camera pointed at the source or you're interviewing someone. It's their story it's not yours.
reporter typing	<p>Narrator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Despite a byline being attached to every story and giving it's author due credit, Massé is right. A journalist's primary job is to report.
MS on cam	SOT [00:02:07] When I was the managing editor of the Indy Channel, I wrote a lot of stories report a lot of stories but also produced a lot of multimedia for the website.
working	<p>Narrator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As a current news professor at Ball State University, Mary Spillman has noticed changes in the career field that's adding more pressure to incoming reporters.
MS on cam	<p>SOT [00:03:03] Technology has made news production be easier from one standpoint...</p> <p>Same time: but today's world there's a lot of extra demands with social media on young journalist.</p>
	Narrator

	<p>(http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> According to Pew Research Center, more than 2/3 of Americans receive their news from social media site, forcing stations to reinvent the way they reach their audiences.
DW on camera	SOT [00:04:28] We are very busy and we are constantly moving from one thing to the next. If you covered something major, you're pretty much immediately focused on what I'm doing next.
star press b-roll	<p>Narrator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Douglas Walker serves as a crime and justice reporter for the Star Press in Muncie. He says in the hustle and bustle of everything, reporters can forget to personally inflect.
DW on camera	SOT [00:05:28] There are obviously unpleasant aspects of what we cover but at the same time we are so busy that there's not much time for introspection and reflection of how really I feel about this.
	<p>Narrator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> While Walker has not personally experienced a traumatic event in the workplace, he certainly has reported on many of them.
DW on camera	SOT[00:07:38] I think over time Surly I remember early on as a young reporter covering events for someone that lost their lives, it would really upset me, and it still does. But now the way I rationalize it in has four number years is this is really not my tragedy and I am not really a first-hand participant. I'm just covering it.
	<p>Narrator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ball State Professor Phil Bremen has a different approach to storytelling.
PB on camera	[00:04:33] Well I got into the business when I

	was 14 I was a newspaper reporter in a small weekly paper and my notion was I got to be strong I can't let my feelings get in the way of the story. What I teach my students now is yes you have to be strong you have to get the story done but you also have to be in touch with your feelings or you'll miss some of the story.
b-roll of his office or his footage that he sent me	<p>Narrator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bremen has covered stories all across the world from Latin America to Miami Florida to the Middle East and Africa. He's thankful to have avoided serious physical and mental harm.
PB on camera	SOT [00:06:28] There was a lot of trauma around me and I had the good fortune for it not to touch me directly. There are some very good journalist some of whom actually served in Vietnam before they covered the war there who were profoundly affected and live with that weight to this day.
focus on eye working, but you can see the screen scrolling	<p>Narrator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> However, no reporter is exempt from being around traumatic event. "Research from the Dart Center suggests that between 80-100% of journalists have been exposed to a work-related traumatic event"
MS on camera	<p>SOT: [0:00 Video 2]</p> <p>Sometimes you are seeing the same types of things that in any EMT or a doctor might see, but of course you're not involved in saving them.</p>
MM on camera	<p>SOT: [0:00 Video 2]</p> <p>Trauma has been affecting life obviously forever in people's lives but it's been studied and dealt with for First Responders with a navy military personnel police fire EMTs they've had interactions name had more of a focus on how they deal with trauma</p> <p>[00:05:43] Journalists were surprisingly left out of the discussion</p>
*b-roll of police officers	

	<p>Narrator</p> <p>That conversation started less than 20 years ago when the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma was established at the University of Washington Department of Communications.</p> <p>From there, the center provides guidance to journalists on how to cover violence and tragedy.</p>
MM on camera	<p>SOT [00:06:19] Part of the goal of not just what I was trying to do with my book but with the Dart Center and coroner and committee to protect journalists is not only making these journalist more aware so that they can protect themselves and get the help they need it they need it but also to be better journalist.</p>
MS on camera	<p>SOT [00:08:35] if you feel like you're going down the road where things are feeling too stressful for you if you have a lot of anxiety, a lot of stress that you're not able to take care of you know I think you would be a good thing to seek help either from your news organization or outside.</p>
	<p>Narrator</p> <p>Professor Massé studied the coping behaviors journalists turned to if they've been affected by a traumatic event. Sometimes those behaviors can have a positive or negative impact.</p>
MM on camera	<p>SOT [00:11:01] It does help if a journalist is married and has a family if there's a support structure in place but that doesn't guarantee that that journalist is necessarily going to be able to deal with the trauma</p>
	<p>Narrator</p> <p>Walker faced a situation where he was affected by a case he covered.</p>
<p>DW on camera</p> <p>drawing</p>	<p>[00:06:33] we had a case of few years ago where a little girl was horribly abused four or five years old abused by step parent in the step parents parent to the degree that she died in mentally</p>

	<p>from just systematic abuse. And there was a trial that was very exciting to cover but a moment that I always remember I try to keep myself apart again always remind myself this is not my tragedy.</p> <p>[00:07:05] But they reproduce a drawing at this little girl had some of a bunny and I recall and it just struck me I had child of my own and I received your eyes almost identical to that for my own children and that kind of really brought her to life from me and that affected me greatly.</p>
MM on camera	<p>[00:00:00 Interview 2] you can take two journalist with the same training, same background, same relative age, and other demographic put them in the same situation and one journalists will react one way and have other psychological issues in the other will have different psychological issues.</p>
	<p>Narrator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Journalists of all ages and colors will come from varying backgrounds, but one thing remains constant in the newsroom.
DW on camera	<p>[00:09:45] You just need to be ready to deal with the emotions of people who in many instances are dealing with the worst event of their life.</p>
	<p>Narrator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This doesn't mean a journalist covers worse case scenarios. Spillman wants to remind others that being a reporter means covering a wide array of stories.
MS on camera	<p>[00:00:58] I don't want to give the impression that it was all about awful awful awful, these are intermingled with a lot of nice stories good people that are doing great things too.</p>
	<p>Narrator</p> <p>Often working under the popular "watch dog" moniker, journalists has been awarded and</p>

	criticized for the content they create all the while balancing daily work demands, and tragic events.
PB on camera	I think our job is the beauty of the job we get to see things that other people don't get to see, sometimes they have no desire to. And then tell them what's going on outside their own lives. I think that's a privilege and responsibility and I'm happy with that.
	THE END?????